

## **Wildfire Burns at New York Refuge on Easter Sunday**

### **by Catherine J. Hibbard/USFWS**

Just before 4:00 a.m. on Sunday, April 4, Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge Manager Tom Jasikoff got a call and it wasn't the Easter Bunny. It was Seneca County 911 reporting a wildfire burning on the refuge right next to the New York State Thruway. The 694-acre Dry Marsh Fire started from an unknown human cause at the end of the refuge's wildlife drive next to the Thruway. Fueled by hundreds of acres of dry cattails and fanned by stiff winds, the fire quickly spread in an impoundment to form a 30-foot wall of flames about a mile wide. Flames and smoke, visible up to 100 miles away, attracted crowds of people. The visitor center remained open the whole day to accommodate an estimated 1,000 visitors.

Firefighters from the local Magee-Tyre Volunteer Fire Department initially responded. Because the fire was burning in the marsh, it was inaccessible and dangerous for firefighters to try to put it out. Jasikoff praised the volunteer firefighters, State Police, New York Thruway Authority, State Department of Environmental Conservation Forest Rangers and other State personnel for responding and managing traffic. "They did a great job monitoring the fire and local roads for any smoke or visibility problems. In situations like this, we really rely on our partners to help us out." Meanwhile, Michael Durfee, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service zone fire management officer for New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, was mobilizing firefighters and marshmaster from his home base, Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge in northern New Jersey. Once on scene, Service firefighter Tracy Gingrich from nearby Syracuse assumed command of the fire.

Conditions were ripe for a fire to burn at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, located in the Finger Lakes Region of upstate New York. March temperatures were seven degrees above normal, precipitation was about an inch below normal, and the high temperature was 87 degrees on April 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, breaking record highs of 72 and 83, well above the normal 50 degrees. "Because of early snow melting, surface fuels were exposed to drying conditions sooner and longer than normal" said Northeast Regional Fire Planner Rick Vollick. "With warm temperatures and a very dry air mass, conditions were ideal for spreading fire." Durfee added, "with such conditions we were concerned that the fire would burn into peat and smoke out the Thruway (I-90) and U.S. Route 20." Service personnel were also worried about a pair of bald eagles nesting on a wet island in the marsh. The wildfire burned within 30 feet of the nest and then stopped due to damp soil. Although ash fell on the eagles' heads, they kept incubating. By about 4:00 in afternoon the entire fire was similarly stopped and contained by open water and a series of ditches and canals.

Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge is in the middle of one of the most active flight lanes in the Atlantic Flyway. It provides resting, feeding, and nesting habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds. According to Jasikoff, wildlife impacts from the fire were minimal because it is still early in the migration/nesting season. "The overall habitat impacts have been mostly beneficial", he said. Public relations were also beneficial as refuge staff were able to capitalize on an unexpected opportunity to get the

word out about wildlife conservation. In addition to spectators at the visitor center, Jasikoff gave interviews to news crews and media outlets from Syracuse to Rochester. “The [Dry Marsh] Fire has been a major event that we have used to educate the public and promote the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Wildlife System,” he said.